Managing Virtual Tournaments

Once upon a time, an e-tournament meant a tournament with electronic ballots. Those were the days. Now it means a tournament with e-everything, including e-judges' lounges with e-coffee and e-donuts and some scruffy looking e-college kid sleeping on the e-couch for the entire weekend.

Welcome to the Roaring 20s.

It is, sadly, too soon to lay out anything close to complete best practices in virtual tournament management, as there simply haven't been enough virtual tournaments from which to extract general principles. So far, however (this is being written in June 2020), we can see some good ideas that have arisen from those tournaments that have happened. Those ideas can act as a starting point.

Meanwhile, at this time there are so many competing technologies vying for videoconferencing app supremacy that there is no point in concentrating on any one in particular. In the long run they all work the same—they provide a virtual room in which a round can take place—and the differences in technical setup are relatively minor. The important thing is to advise your guests of the platform you'll be using well in advance of the tournament so that they can assure that it works on their devices.

Scheduling

A lot of lip service was given during the early days of the pandemic that somehow virtual tournaments suddenly eliminated not only travel but geography. Students in Petaluma could now

sign up for tournaments in north Bronx.

No.

The problem with debating across time zones is that the number of hours available during the day becomes limited by the number of hours of time difference. That is, if you are on the east coast and you want to make things manageable for folks on the west coast, you lose 3 hours of tournament time to the vagaries of time zones. There are two generally accepted ideas regarding virtual tournaments, that no one should debate before 8:00 a.m., and that no one should debate after 8:00 p.m. Debating from home at night, it has been fairly agreed, seriously challenges almost everyone's accessibility. From that point on, the math is simple. A NY tournament trying to accommodate Californians would have to start at 11:00 a.m. EST and end at 8:00 p.m. EST. That means rounds at 11, 2, and 5 EST (double-flighted LD/PF rounds or policy rounds). Starting at 8:00 a.m. EST would give you a much needed fourth round.

Well-spaced single flights of LD and PF are preferable to double flights if for no other reason than double flights require you to usher judges from virtual room to virtual room, but no evidence has yet been provided that the removal of travel requirements will somehow cause the size of the country's judge pool to explode. Good judges for hire are a limited resource, and while virtuality might redistribute them, it probably won't multiply them. Nevertheless, those who protest that they can find (or demand) the judges for single-flighting LD and PF are welcome to try it. Nice work if you can get it, but it probably won't be the standard. Still, single flights allow for more rounds. That's an attractive thought.

In addition to all of this, "Zoom fatigue" is a real thing, and there is debate that four rounds in one day is too many. Staring at faces on a screen all day is not easy. Come to think of it, being in a classroom IRL and debating all day is also not easy. The difference

is that the IRL situation is a controlled environment. The environment in which people participate at virtual tournaments is out of your control completely, and often out of theirs, and needs to be understood and respected, especially if you wish to stay in the good graces of debaters' families.

One thing that has been clearly expressed in early discussions is that tournaments need to post their schedules well in advance. Forewarned is forearmed. And tell people in advance to prepare their meals and grab lunch between rounds. This may seem obvious—and it is—but that doesn't mean that anyone will do it.

As far as the actual round is concerned, everyone should arrive 15 minutes before the round to set up e-mail chains and do a tech check, then the round should start at the posted start time. This allows time for minor issues (temporary loss of audio, say) to be resolved without affecting the tournament overall. And a hard forfeit rule should be set for no-shows at start time. Your tournament simply doesn't have the luxury of people not debating when they're supposed to debate. It's not likely that they got lost looking for the building. Finally, decision times should be set for the rounds. Maybe 60 minutes after posted start time for a flight of LD or PF, 120 for Policy.

In aid of all of these things, we provide the following. (Don't worry about the names of the divisions yet; we'll get to that.)

Single-flighted, 7 rounds

	Start time	Duration	Finish time
Day 1			
RD 1	4:00 PM	1:30	5:30 PM
RD 2	5:30 PM	1:30	7:00 PM
RD 3	7:30 PM	1:30	9:00 PM
RD			
RD			
RD			
Day 2			
RD 4	9:00 AM	1:30	10:30 AM
RD 5	11:30 AM	1:30	1:00 PM
RD 6	2:30 PM	1:30	4:00 PM
RD 7	5:30 PM	1:30	7:00 PM
Day 3			
Doubles	8:30 AM	2:30	11:00 AM
Octs	12:00	1:30	1:30 PM
Qs	2:00	1:30	3:30 AM
Semis	4:00	1:30	5:30 AM
Final	18:00	1:30	7:30 PM

Double-flighted, 6 rounds

	Start time	Duration	Finish time
Day 1			
RD 1	3:30 PM	2:30	6:00 PM
RD 2	6:00 PM	2:30	8:30 PM
Day 2			
RD 3	8:30 AM	2:30	11:00 AM
RD 4	11:00 AM	2:30	1:30 PM
RD 5	2:00 PM	2:30	4:30 PM
RD 6	5:00 PM	2:30	7:30 PM
Day 3			
Doubles	8:30 AM	2:30	11:00 AM
Octs	12:00	1:30	1:30 PM
Qs	2:00	1:30	3:30 AM
Semis	4:00	1:30	5:30 AM
Final	18:00	1:30	7:30 PM

Single-flighted, Sat-Sun

	Start time	Duration	Finish time
Saturday			
RD 1	8:30 AM	1:30	10:00 AM
RD 2	10:30 AM	1:30	12:00 PM
RD 3	1:00 PM	1:30	2:30 PM
RD 4	3:00 PM	1:30	4:30 PM
RD 5	5:00 PM	1:30	6:30 PM
RD 6	7:00 PM	1:30	8:30 PM
Day 3			
Doubles	8:30 AM	2:30	11:00 AM
Octs	12:00	1:30	1:30 PM
Qs	2:00	1:30	3:30 AM
Semis	4:00	1:30	5:30 AM
Final	18:00	1:30	7:30 PM

Double-flighted, Sat-Sun

	Start time	Duration	Finish time
Saturday			
RD 1	8:30 AM	2:30	11:00 AM
RD 2	11:00 AM	2:30	1:30 PM
RD 3	2:00 PM	2:30	4:30 PM
RD 4	5:00 PM	2:30	7:30 PM
Day 3			
RD 5	8:30 AM	2:30	11:00 AM
Octs	11:00 AM	1:30	12:30 PM
Qs	1:00 PM	1:30	2:30 PM
Semis	3:00 PM	1:30	4:30 PM
Final	5:00 PM	1:30	6:30 PM

Double-flighted, 6 rounds

	Start time	Duration	Finish time
Friday			
RD 1	3:30 PM	2:30	6:00 PM
RD 2	6:00 PM	2:30	8:30 PM
Saturday			
RD 3	8:30 AM	2:30	11:00 AM
RD 4	11:00 AM	2:30	1:30 PM
RD 5	2:00 PM	2:30	4:30 PM
RD 6	5:00 PM	2:30	7:30 PM

Divisions

In the normal run of things, a tournament offers the divisions it thinks people want, and which it has available space to accommodate. In the virtual run of things, things are going to be different.

The first question to decide is how many people to break to any elims. With IRL tournaments, you can often guarantee all 4-2s or 5-2s will break to some sort of runoff, i.e., a triples round. Your cap IRL is usually set by your available space. In virtual tournaments, available space is unlimited, but that doesn't mean the size of your divisions should be unlimited. You probably need to set a cap to enable all down-2s to break. Alternately you can simply pick off the top 32 and break them straight to doubles regardless of win record, thus generating a 4-2 screw. It's rough going 4-2 and not breaking on the basis of a speaker point or two, especially when it's speaking into a microphone. So tournaments are going have to decide either to limit field size or set up for 4-2 screws. If you're going to cap the field, you'll also need to cap individual school entries, to say 2 or 3, but don't pin yourself down on that. Tight caps are going to be extremely problematic. Be prepared. But then again, lots of screws are also extremely problematic. Pick your poison.

BTW, PF fields, which at some tournaments tend to be ginormous, have already learned that down-2 screws are a reality. This doesn't make them a good thing, but there is less resistance than in LD or CX.

If you're capping the varsity field at 90 (all 4-2s break to doubles) or 140 (one third of 4-2s get screwed)—either of which is the presumed fielder's choice you have to make early, and neither of which is perfect—and you normally would cap much higher (e.g., we usually cap college PF events at 240 and run 7 prelims), you

will probably still have folks wanting to debate at your tournament. After all, not all of your field is necessarily in the hunt for bids. If this is the case, we're suggesting offering a second division we're calling Community/Open. This division has no caps, and breaks, at most, the top 32 (see the sked above; obviously this is flexible, depending on field size). This division is intended for the overflow from the bid-oriented varsity, e.g., younger or less seasoned debaters, strong novices stretching their chops, former middle school debaters too experienced for a pure novice division. We call it Community/Open to distinguish it from the traditional Open event which might indeed have a TOC bid, and to avoid diminishing its competitiveness; we don't want it to sound bush league. It is, essentially, a broader version of JV, without the onus of that designation. Additionally, once the season commences, you will probably also want to add a novice division, absolutely limited to first-year debaters. Our best wording for this division is this: "Novice is defined as a student in their first season (2020-21) of competition at any level. Coaches may contact the tournament directors if they wish to offer exceptions." This will exclude avid former middle school debaters, but allow exceptions, at your discretion, for lightly experienced former MSers. And one last thing. Define your invited teams as 9th-12th grade students officially representing their high schools. Especially in an era of virtual tournaments, the last thing you want is unofficial, independent entries, and all the hassles they entail.

One important point: if your tournament has regular guests year after year, you want to service them first. There are many ways to handle this, and you can easily come up with one that suits you. The thing is, when travel is no longer an issue, your tournament may suddenly become accessible to folks who previously couldn't manage to attend. You need to be sensitive to this issue, and make sure that your registration process is fair. It might not be easy to balance field size and regular customers and newcomers who might provide new diversity, but, well, that's why your earning the

big bucks. Choose wisely, Grasshopper. 80/20 Regulars/Noobs?
90/10. Maybe you'll just have to see when the registration starts.

Your Trophy is in the Mail

The hardest thing about running a virtual tournament of any
substance might turn out to be trophies. In theory, it's simple
enough.

- You figure out a budget
    - You'll pass the cost along, of course, but you'll have to
      know what that cost is
    - And it includes trophies, packaging and postage
- You study mail packaging
- You obtain trophies that you can easily package, and
  packages you can easily stuff with trophies
- You mail the trophies to the winners

Yeah. Simple enough.

In the normal run of things, going into a tournament you have a
good idea, based on past performance, of how many trophies you
will need. But past performance might not be a good indicator of
our upcoming virtual season. Of course, a good rule of thumb is to
get the most you might need, and put neither dates nor division on
them, just "Groundhog Invitational Semifinalist" or "Chipmunk
Challenge Quaterfinalist" or whatever. That way, you can mix and
match divisions, even speech and debate, and any leftovers are
good to go for next time. But make them nice. It's bad enough that
we're not anywhere in person; at least if people take tin it should be
nice tin worthy of display. Remember, a lot of school
administrations measure the success of their forensic dollar
investment by the weight of the tin that comes home. Act
accordingly.

I would recommend acrylic, and flat. This makes them lightweight, and packable. Also, you can put really nice designs on acrylic for not much cost. Maybe go with one size for all levels, i.e., same size for octs through finals. Then you buy up as many envelopes (the stuffy kind) as you need into which they will fit. And remember, some schools will win a lot. Sending more than one to your normal sweeps winners is probably a given.

If I were you, I'd look into stamps.com. Or you can go spend a few weeks after the tournament at the post office with the clerks there mailing the envelopes one at a time, day after day...

And that's the hardest part. You do have to mail them. You have to find someone to sort them, stuff them and ship them. Let's say you have 3 divisions of PF all breaking to doubles. That's 96 trophies, times two. And then there's all the other divisions. (Actually, you might want to do medals for doubles people. Medals are cheap, and quite popular with students.)

Oh, yeah. Where are you going to get the mailing addresses? No, they're not on tabroom.com. And what about programs that won 17 trophies?

Trophy distribution is going to be…fun? But if you're prepared, and have a good team on it, it's doable.

Tournament Management

The virtual tournament management roles are beginning to look something like this:

- **Tournament director**: one person to rule them all. This

person should have no specific responsibilities other than managing everyone else, and putting out fires as they arise, much the same as at an IRL tournament

- **Judges' lounge manager** to lead a judge meeting, if necessary, and to find judge replacements and the like. If you have speech and debate, you probably need two separate lounges.
- **Student lounge manager** for assemblies and to find participants. Perhaps this person can lead the award ceremony (if any).
- **Room checkers** to see that rounds have actually started, to solve tech issues if any, and to prod judges for ballots
- **Tab staff** doing pairings, working with rest of staff when subs are needed and the like. They should be connected in a video tab room.
  - o Separate video rooms should be created for each tab group once the tournament reaches a certain size with multiple divisions. Too much distracting crosstalk occurs otherwise.
- **Tech desk**, i.e., someone who can hear a problem and immediately suggest the solution, like turning off a firewall and so forth. Maybe one each for judges and students at a large tournament.
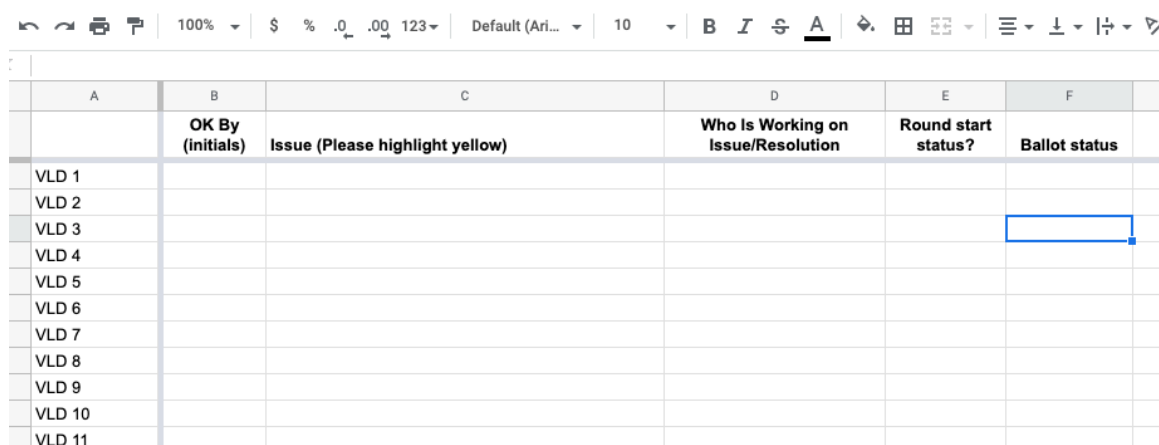
For the sake of communication among the staff during the tournament, Slack is proving to be the app of choice. It runs on everything and allows for easy setup of channels.

- Create discrete channels with selected personnel, not everybody in on every chat. Otherwise, again, there is too much crosstalk, and important things can get lost.
  - o Channels might be PF, LD, Congress, General Discussion, Tech Issues, etc. Otherwise you can never find anything.

- It is strongly recommended to turn off notifications, or you'll hear nothing but ringing bells all weekend.

Maintain a shared google doc showing rounds have started
- List each room
  - LD1, LD2, etc
- Assign checker to a swath of rooms
- Checker drops in on each room
- Checker marks room as started (for real) or solves/reports problems
- If ballots are late, checker contacts judges to goose

	OK By (initials)	Issue (Please highlight yellow)	Who Is Working on Issue/Resolution	Round start status?	Ballot status
VLD 1					
VLD 2					
VLD 3					
VLD 4					
VLD 5					
VLD 6					
VLD 7					
VLD 8					
VLD 9					
VLD 10					
VLD 11					

Tech

Please sing the following: "Everybody must use Chrome" (to the tune of "Everybody Must Get Stoned"). Chrome does seem to provide a stable base for all the various video platforms.
- Tech problems in general tend to be simple things solved by switching mics or turning devices off and on
- Use of one's office equipment (i.e., a work computer) can be problematic due to the traditional blocking of non-work software by IT departments. We're talking parent judges here.

- All problems can be solved when all teams thoroughly test everything in advance days before the tournament
  - Chance of all teams thoroughly testing everything in advance days before the tournament? Practically zero.

To encourage thorough tech checks before tournament day, advise participants early on what software they need to try. So far, the process seems to be:

1. Send information to everyone in a timely manner on the platforms being run.
2. Almost everyone immediately panics and sends you feverish emails asking which platforms are being run.
3. Sigh.
4. Send information to everyone on the platforms being run
5. Rinse. Repeat.

Team virtual buses are becoming a thing, where schools assemble on tournament day for the coach to count noses before checking into the tournament. Buses can also serve as team practice and hangout rooms both before and during the tournament.

Electronic onsite registration is recommended over, say, phone calls, and is easily achieved in tabroom. Texting is another possibility, say at tournaments where debate began on Friday and speech begins on Friday, making it hard to track who has checked in. It is recommended to keep the ability of coaches to change their entries up till the close of registration, at which time they will know who is on their bus and they can confirm attendance or make necessary drops.

E-judging

By now, the use of e-ballots has become relatively universal at IRL tournaments, and we won't go into a whole song and dance about them here. Adaptation was thorough and quick, both in speech and debate divisions. Nevertheless, the whole idea may be new to some people, especially the parent judges in your PF pool. Once you throw in virtual tournaments, a lot of things are new to almost everybody. Our documentation on How to be a Good E-Judge (http://www.jimmenick.com/vault/goodejudge.pdf) covers much of territory in our new virtual world; feel free to distribute it to your judges before a tournament.

The following should prove helpful:

In advance:

A few days before the tournament, after all your entries and judges are set, and before you open prefs/strikes (if any), send out a message to all coaches reminding them to make sure all their judges (and, for that matter, students) are linked to individual tabroom accounts. We suggest including language like that posted at the end of this guide.

Make sure that there are solid fines in place for missing rounds, and make sure that the team's coach is notified whenever a fine is levied. (There's a box to click on the fines page in tabroom.) This will guarantee responses from the teams affected.

During the tournament:

The biggest issues at a tournament are lingering luddites who still need to be linked, judges who press start (sometimes even for both flights) the moment they get the notification as compared to when the round actually starts, judges who don't press start when the round does start, and judges who don't enter results in a timely

manner. There are other issues, but these are the big ones.

When you do the pairing in tabroom, you will see any luddites clearly marked on the schematic with a little **L**. Before issuing the pairing, replace and fine the luddites. This will alert the coaches that there is a problem, and they will shortly come into tab, so to speak, and you can explain that judges must be linked, and you can, at that point, link them. And remove the fine, because you've made your point. The fine was there to move some butts, not actually punish people for not judging.

Once a pairing is set, publish it on the web and blast it. **We recommend allowing half an hour from blast to start time.** Half an hour has proven workable over many tournaments. More is unnecessary, and less is unwieldy. Give people half an hour, and they will use it and then, more than likely, start the round.

Then there is the poke:

- Using the **Blast Message Only** field, send a 15-minute warning before the round to all unstarted rounds, telling them that it is, indeed, the 15-minute warning. Specify flight 1, if that is appropriate. If the tournament is virtual, tell everyone that now is the time to be in their rounds for equipment tests and setting up email chains (if any).

- At the literal start time, using the same field, blast a "start now" message. You will see individual start times appearing on the tabroom schematic as rounds start. At virtual tournaments, your room checkers will certify that the rounds are indeed in progress by visiting the rooms at the start time. Otherwise, poke individual judges whose rounds haven't started 5 minutes after start time, using the blast message ability to that round only, and to that judge only. Begin with pokes and escalate to phone calls or drop-ins. (Our theory is that the last thing a judge wants is the tab room calling them

and asking them what the hell is going on. As the fact that such calls are possible starts entering into the mindset of the activity, judges are going to start getting the message that they need to do their jobs in a professional fashion or else they will get challenged on it. Who needs that annoyance?)

- If judges are absent or unresponsive, find new ones, and reblast, noting the judge change in your comment (e.g., "Sotomayor in as judge"). Include both the new and old judge names in the blast, so everyone knows who's been replaced. After the blast, fine and delete the miscreant so that there's only one judge set for the round.

- If students are absent, forfeit them. There is no excuse for not being on time for a round for which you have had a half-hour warning. (This is especially true at virtual tournaments.) At IRL events, if we're feeling generous, we usually give them no more than 10 minutes for a flight 1 and 5 minutes for a flight 2.

- Send a 10-minute warning toward the decision time of the round to judges who have not yet entered decisions.

- Escalate from pokes to calls of judges running seriously late, usually the last two or three unentered ballots. At virtual tournaments, this is where your checkers can come in, going into the room and literally talking to the judge.

- If rounds are flighted, at the appropriate time send the various messages as noted above Keep in mind that the judge in the first flight needs to be "moved."

All this works. Nevertheless, we strongly recommend at IRL tournaments at least one tournament staffer in each area or on each floor (in each building, if you have multiple venues) as boots on

the ground to report problems to tab, such as when judges don't respond and the like.

The key here is, keep people alert to making the tournament run on time, and start calling people when things go awry. You have all the judge phone numbers in tabroom. You're using a system that enables long-distance tournaments, so use your phone, the device that eliminates long distances. Do you really care if you annoy a judge too dumb/obdurate/befuddled to click the start button or call you up when a student doesn't show (after you've given out your number a hundred times)? Tab's job includes keeping the trains running on time. Feel free to put on your solemn conductor's hat to make it so, if that's what it takes.

By the way, as a tournament progresses, problems tend to diminish. Keep posting the start warnings and the like, but once you get into elims, most people are just as anxious to get the thing over with as you are, and cooperation will be virtually a hundred percent.

* The language posted at the end of this guide. Much of this applies to IRL events only, but don't let that deter you. IRL will be back again someday.

We are mandating e-ballots in all divisions of debate this year. It should mean a faster tournament for all, and for the judges, less schlepping around delivering paper ballots back to tab. The following is everything the coaches and judges need to know.

Coaches: If your judges have not already done so, have them create an account on tabroom.com. Do this before coming to the tournament. They simply click on "sign up" at the top of the tabroom.com home page and follow the instructions. Both judges and students should have unique accounts in their own names. (Judges who have accounts in their coach's name, which some do occasionally, are unable to access their ballots. Students without unique accounts will be unable to debate at virtual tournaments, and will not receive notifications.) NOTE: You might want to link to this doc for complete instructions:
http://www.debatecoaches.org/s/e-ballots.pdf

All judges should come prepared with electronic devices capable of entering results. There is wifi throughout the campus, and any device—smartphone, tablet, computer, Chromebook—will do. Make sure that it is charged, and that it works. E-balloting does not necessarily mean that you need to bring a computer to rounds for flowing or whatnot; the device you decide to use in rounds, and how you adjudicate a round, is up to you. But you do need a device to enter results. And keep in mind that even if the wifi were to go to hell in a handbasket, you can still always use your phone to enter results, and write up your ballots later when the wifi comes back.

The tournament will not be able to accommodate any paper ballots in the debate events. Judges who are unprepared to judge electronically will be taken out of the tournament, and their

schools fined the full missing-judge fee. [Lately we've been setting the missing judge fee as twice the cost of hired judges to disabuse people of the idea that if they didn't get a hire they can show up anyhow and pay literally the same fee, thus stealing the judges you need to run the tournament effectively.]

One half hour before the scheduled start of a round, pairings and assignments will be released, and all participants will be notified of where to go. You will have plenty of time to get there, especially if you use the official school map at xxxxx. [We strongly suggest you post a map on your invitation website page.] *Judges who have not gotten an assignment shall remain on call in case an assigned judge does not show up. For those in rounds, there will also be a 10-minute warning and a start-now message.*

We will be enforcing strict rules on making the rounds happen. Everyone is expected to be in the rooms and starting the rounds at the posted times. Judges who are not in their rooms within five minutes of the posted times will be replaced and fined. Students who are not in their rooms within five minutes of the posted times will forfeit. If both students are in the room and there is no judge five minutes after the posted time, students must report missing the judge to tab for replacement. Failure to do so will result in double forfeits.

Judges: The only way we can measure what's happening is by your correct use of the start-round button. *Please do not hit the start button until you and both of your teams are in the room and, literally, starting the round. If you press the button willy-nilly before the round starts, it jeopardizes the scheduling of the rooms.* **If you don't press the button as the round is starting, we will assume that you are a no-show, and replace and fine you.**

The phone number(s) for tab are xxxxx. If there are any problems, call or text us.

What constitutes a problem:

- *No judge in room at start time*
- *All competitors not in room at start time*
- *Other, as it relates to reasons there's not a debate going on*

By the same token, if rounds do not start on time, we will be calling you. We have found that the phone is a marvelous device for talking to people who are some distance away from us—who knew?—like judges who haven't pressed start, or coaches of judges who have gone missing.

Judges must enter results immediately when the round concludes. (We'll call you if you keep us waiting.) **The decision must come before the critique.** *We ask judges to limit oral critiques as much as possible so that we can turn the rooms around in a timely manner. Results will be posted on tabroom as soon as they are all in after each round, and, of course, you can write critiques on your e-ballots whenever you have a free minute, which means that not only will the debaters receive them, but so will their coaches. In fact, judges can add to or modify their comments on e-ballots until the "end of tournament" results are published, which means they can add to them during whatever free time that might arise (although, of course, they cannot change decisions or points).*

Thank you. For those of you new to e-ballots, and that may be a lot of PF judges, we realize that all of this sounds rather fierce, to say the least, but for e-ballots to work with this many people in this many buildings requires everyone to be on the same page. The goal is a fair, on-time tournament. Let' s make it so!